



APPENDIX G

ACQUIRED LANDS CONSIDERED FOR WILDERNESS

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ACQUIRED LANDS CONSIDERED FOR ADDITIONS TO BLACK RIDGE CANYONS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

Acquired Lands -- Devils Canyon (640 acres), Flume Canyon (320 acres), Ruby Canyon East (130 acres), Ruby Canyon West (160 acres). Total acquired lands is 1,250 acres.

I. INTRODUCTION

The four parcels being reviewed for wilderness suitability are contiguous to the northern boundary of the Black Ridge Canyons WSA (19,595 acres recommended for wilderness in 1992). This WSA was analyzed in the November 1989 "Grand Junction Final Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement." They are located in Mesa County 10 miles west of Grand Junction, Colorado. Each area is bounded on three sides by public lands administered by BLM. The Devils Canyon parcel bounds private land on the north. Bureau of Reclamation withdrawn lands for the Horsethief State Wildlife Area form the northern boundary of Flume Canyon. The two acquired parcels in Ruby Canyon border a combination of public land and private lands along the Colorado River's edge.

Between 1992 and 1996, four parcels of private lands contiguous to the Black Ridge Canyons WSA were acquired by the BLM (see Maps G-1, page G-7 and G-2, page G-8). The parcels were inventoried for their wilderness potential as natural extensions of the contiguous WSA. Two of the parcels were determined to include lands that were unnatural in character. These parcels (Devils Canyon -- 440 acres and Flume Canyon -- 40 acres) will be dropped from further wilderness review as soon as the Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge Integrated Resource Plan is approved.

Although the contiguous Black Ridge Canyons WSA was studied under Section 603 of FLPMA and included in the Grand Junction Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (1985), the review of these acquired parcels is being studied under Section 202 of FLPMA and included in the Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge Integrated Management Plan. This section of FLPMA directs BLM to prepare and maintain on a continuing basis an inventory of all public lands and their resources and values including wilderness. This wilderness inventory is summarized in this appendix.

In the study phase, BLM evaluates wilderness study areas based on a set of specific criteria which will be outlined in this appendix. Determining an area's suitability or nonsuitability for designation as wilderness means

determining whether the area is more suitable for wilderness preservation or more suitable for other uses.

II. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATION

Wilderness Characteristics

Naturalness

Four parcels (see Maps G-1 and G-2) were evaluated for their naturalness. The two Ruby Canyon parcels contiguous to the Black Ridge Canyons WSA are predominantly natural with negligible imprints of man. The northern two-thirds of the Devils Canyon parcel has been modified by man with several significant imprints that detract from its naturalness. It is in this area that the canyon opens into a broadly eroded bottom. The southern part of this parcel is more characteristic of Devils Canyon which cuts more than 600 feet into the northern, sloping edge of the Uncompahgre Plateau and is one of the most spectacular canyons in the Black Ridge Canyons WSA.

Over the wide mesa top to the northwest is Flume Canyon. Here, a bladed two-track has been constructed through the parcel for about one-fourth mile which detracts from the naturalness of an open landscape. Bladed cuts of one to two feet are common along this section. The two-track continues with few cuts through flatter terrain. This southern part of the parcel is very natural in character and displays a well developed system of side canyons. Numerous natural features on each parcel adds to the natural setting.

The Ruby Canyon parcels form part of the shoreline of the Colorado River in Ruby Canyon. A small cabin is present on the western parcel but its impact on the overall naturalness is minimal and overall both parcels enhance the naturalness of the contiguous WSA. The small structure is used as a line cabin by the grazing permittee and this use is projected to continue.

Vegetation on the canyon floors is characterized by a combination of grassy meadows and sparse stands of pinyon-juniper woodland. Isolated stands of cottonwood trees and other riparian species such as willows, river birch and box elder can be found along the drainage and river shoreline. A well developed cottonwood stand is located in the Ruby Canyon West parcel. Flatter areas typically consist of big sagebrush with a scattering of grasses.

The vegetative variety found on these four parcels compliment the vegetation types in the WSA which provide habitat for a variety of wildlife. Of special note are bald eagles who winter in the area and are present every day mid-December to mid-March in Ruby and Horsethief Canyons.

Peregrine falcons nest near the WSA and undoubtedly hunt the Ruby Canyon parcels. Cottonwood trees that grow along the Colorado River are an important part of the raptor habitat. Golden eagles and canyon tree frogs are sensitive species that are found in the area. The bird species, Scott's orioles, Gray vireo, and Cassins kingbird are also in the general area.

Solitude

The Black Ridge Canyons WSA provides outstanding opportunities for solitude. The large number of canyons and side canyons allow visitors to disperse throughout the WSA. Although the add on parcels by themselves do not possess outstanding opportunities for solitude because of their small size; they do enhance these opportunities in the contiguous WSA.

Primitive and Unconfined Primitive Recreation

The Black Ridge Canyons WSA provides outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation in close proximity to the Grand Junction area (population 100,000 plus). The unit's outstanding scenery and landscape variety, its interesting geologic features, its four major canyons and its many resources provide numerous opportunities for hiking, sightseeing, float boating, horseback riding, hunting and many other activities. And all of these activities are enhanced by the parcels in Devils Canyon, Flume Canyon and Ruby Canyon which are natural extensions of the WSA and share its outstanding opportunities.

Special Features

The WSA possesses outstanding geological, paleontological, archaeological and ecological and biological values. The four add-on parcels are considered to share these values.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

Wilderness designation of the Black Ridge WSA and the four add-one parcels would add an outstanding representative of the juniper-pinyon woodland of the Colorado Plateau to the National Wilderness Preservation System but would not add a new ecosystem or landform. This ecosystem is currently represented by only one area in Colorado and 11 in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Expanding the Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive within a days driving time (five hours) of major population centers

The add-on parcels as part of the Black Ridge Canyon WSA are within a five hour drive of three major population centers and within one hour of Grand Junction, the largest metropolitan area on the western slope of Colorado. These areas include Denver, Colorado and population centers of Salt Lake/Ogden and Provo/Orem in Utah.

Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Area

The four add-on parcels as part of the WSA would contribute to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System. The nearest designated wilderness areas are about two hours from the Black Ridge Canyons WSA.

Manageability

The four add-on parcels as contiguous areas to Black Ridge Canyons WSA can be managed to maintain wilderness values.

Energy and Mineral Resource Values

The U.S. Geologic Survey prepared a mineral assessment of the Black Ridge Canyons WSA in 1988. This report's findings would generally also apply to the four add-on parcels. The area on the south side of the Colorado River in the WSA has a high resource/low development potential for placer gold deposits but is closed under a protective withdrawal. There are no oil and gas in the WSA. The development potential for oil and gas is low based on the lack of a stratigraphic section favorable for oil and gas occurrence.

Local Social and Economic Conditions

Wilderness designation of the Black Ridge Canyons WSA and the four add-on parcels would incrementally help to increase recreation use in the Grand Junction area. Greater public awareness of the WSA would draw wilderness users from outside west central Colorado. Wilderness use is projected to grow by 15 to 20 percent over 10 years. This increase would generate some increase in local income and, although not large, could be noticed in the Grand Junction area. The area has become very popular in the last 10 years and use will likely continue to increase.

III. Recommendation and Rationale

The Devils Canyon (200 acres) and Flume Canyons (280 acres) parcels provide key "jig saw puzzle pieces" in the canyons they help make up (see Maps G-1 and G-2). The Devils Canyon parcel, although small, helps to define a canyon ecosystem that had been segmented by private property. A similar situation was present in Flume Canyon where the entire lower canyon had been in private ownership blocking public use and enjoyment of the canyon ecosystem. The Ruby Canyon East and Ruby Canyon West acquired parcels now complete a distinct land form that is part of a large river meander that is a well known landmark in Ruby Canyon ("the big meander").

770 acres recommended suitable for wilderness (four parcels)

480 acres recommended unsuitable for nonwilderness (two parcels)

It is recommended that 770 acres in four parcels be designated wilderness as contiguous parts and natural extensions of the Black Ridge Canyons WSA. The preferred alternative would be to designate the entire 770 acres as part of the 19,595 acre Black Ridge Canyons WSA.

The contiguous WSA was recommended for wilderness designation because of its size, naturalness, outstanding scenery and landscape variety, spectacular geologic features, cultural and paleontological values, ecological diversity and outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive, unconfined recreation. Four major canyons and several side canyons, 13 rock arches and other geologic features, changing vegetation patterns and the shore of the Colorado River create a spectacular setting for the recreationist. The parcels at the lower ends of Devils and Flume Canyons enhance the above values including opportunities to experience outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. The Ruby Canyon parcels also add to the WSA's wilderness values including some valuable cottonwood groves along the Colorado River.

Wilderness designation of these four parcels would help complete long-term protection of two canyon systems and two shoreline areas along the river. Because of their small size, these parcels by themselves do not have outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. However, when considered with the contiguous WSA, these parcels are an extension of the Black Ridge Canyons WSA and therefore they share its outstanding opportunities. In the contiguous WSA, there are 18 miles of deep canyons that can be hiked. The two canyon parcels add an additional mile to this figure. Visitors will also have two new shoreline areas to enjoy.

Wilderness designation of these four parcels would help preserve valuable habitat for bighorn sheep, deer, mountain lion and bald and golden eagles. There are about 55 bighorn sheep in the WSA in 1997.

Two parcels of land in Devils Canyon (440 acres) and Flume Canyon (40 acres) are recommended for release for uses other than wilderness. The lower Devils Canyon parcel has been heavily impacted by roads, power lines, bridges, reservoirs, and major dirt work for building sites. Overall, 440 acres of the newly acquired 640 acres in Devils Canyon lack naturalness. The most northern, newly acquired 40 acre parcel in Flume Canyon has the major imprint of a constructed, bladed two-track way that is easily visible. One to two foot cuts are frequent along approximately one quarter-mile of steeper way in this area of the canyon.

No major manageability problems or resource conflicts would result from wilderness designation. Mountain bikes are using the Pollock Bench Trail in the WSA next to Flume Canyon while the WSA is under review by Congress. Mountain bikes have not been allowed to ride the two-track way in lower Flume Canyon because of the private property status until 1996. The Interim Management Policy for lands under wilderness review is to generally not allow mountain bikes in WSAs.

There are no mining claims within any of the four parcels. The BLM did acquire the mineral rights with all four parcels. The mineral development potential for the WSA is projected to be low because most of the area has a low mineral potential. Much of the shoreline including the Ruby Canyon parcels are considered to have high potential for placer deposits (U.S. Geological Survey 1988). These parcels have no claims and are within a protective withdrawal. There are no oil and gas leases in the areas recommended for wilderness. The USGS and BLM report that the area has a low development potential for oil and gas based on a lack of a stratigraphic section favorable for oil and gas occurrence.

All the parcels are open to leasing.

The Ruby Canyon parcels were previously owned by the grazing permittee in the Colorado Ridge allotment and will continue to be grazed as part of this allotment. The livestock operator uses motor vehicles approximately three times a year to conduct livestock operations. The Devils Canyon and Flume Canyon parcels are within the Three Canyon Allotment, which is currently not grazed (unallotted). Historically, sheep grazed in Devils and Flume Canyons.

